

— Schönenwerd—New York —

Bally Evening Shoes

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It is remarkable how many extravagant evening shoes dating from the 1930s are to be found in the company archives of the Swiss shoe firm *Bally*: shoes with elegant heels, in gold or silver leather with pale blue grosgrain fabric or red satin, decorated with delicate stitching or rhinestone buckles. Most of the shoes, especially from the first half of the century, are similar in form [FIG. 1].

The heels are moderately high, and the toes rounded: heels and toes tend to be enclosed, and narrow straps support the foot. Later on, towards the end of the decade, one or two sandals appear which leave the foot more exposed, together with the occasional platform shoe. What is remarkable about the shoes, and typical of *Bally*, is the high quality of the workmanship and the artistry of the detailing and the decorative elements. Of the approximately 600 ladies' shoes in the shoe archive dating from the 1930s, 241 can be categorized as evening shoes—more than one third. Even a very elegant lady



[1] Evening shoes by Bally, 1930s
(Historical Archives of Bally Schuhfabriken AG; photo: Manuel Fabritz,
© Bally)

would not have had such a high proportion of evening shoes in her wardrobe. Why are there so many luxurious shoes in a period which falls between the start of the Great Depression in 1929 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939? How can this collection of costly objects be analyzed and categorized? For whom were the elegant shoes intended?

As the price lists for shoes produced for Switzerland show,¹ these styles were not made for home consumption. In most of the lists, evening shoes are shown in a category of their own, but they are very much simpler in design and made of less expensive materials. The styles are more enclosed; in fact, most of the shoes are pumps. There is also a complete absence of coloured fabric and much less decoration. The shoes are mainly black, sometimes trimmed with gold or silver leather.

The elegant evening shoes, then, were intended for export. Ever since its foundation in 1851, *Bally* had been geared towards international sales; the Swiss market was too small for sustained commercial success. In the 1920s and 1930s, once the company had become well established in the German, French, and British markets,² capturing the US market became an important objective. Though promisingly large, however, this was a market with exacting quality standards, America being the world leader in shoe production.

It is my contention that *Bally* captured the US market with high-fashion shoes, of which the luxurious ladies' shoes in the company archives are examples. Did these shoes, then, match up to elegant New York society's standards of high fashion? Is there any evidence of *Bally* shoes in the USA? And what proof is there of commercial ties? These are the questions I shall be investigating in this chapter.

“21 Pairs of Shoes”

By the 1930s, shoes were already receiving a lot of attention in the American edition of *Vogue*, in both editorials and advertisements. European fashion periodicals, on the other hand, still hardly ever mentioned shoes. There were practically no articles about them in *die neue linie*, an avant-garde magazine with artwork by famous Bauhaus designers such as László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer. The same is true of *Elegante Welt*, a

conservative German publication of the same period. Even in the Swiss *Annabelle*, which first appeared in 1938, there was only the occasional mention of footwear.

A good example of how important a topic shoes were for American *Vogue* is an article published in April 1930. Entitled “21 Pairs of Shoes”, it declared that all of the following 21 pairs of shoes were to be found in the well-dressed woman’s wardrobe: “Eight are for general daytime wear, morning and afternoon. Seven are for sportswear, both active and spectator variety. The evening group includes four, the boudoir group two.”³ The article takes up seven pages. On the first, the shoes are pictured in a wardrobe; then each one is illustrated again individually. Likewise, the shoes are described in detail, both in the text and in the picture captions. Comparing the evening shoes illustrated here with those from the *Bally* company archives, one finds almost identical styles [FIGS. IIA, IIB]. The evening-shoe group includes two pairs of sandals with ankle straps and enclosed toes, one, from Delman,⁴ in silk with a narrow gold-leather strap, the other in silver brocade with a blue sheen and silver leather trim, from Altman. Also recommended are two pairs of evening pumps, one shoe described as a “classic opera pump”⁵ in black



[IIA, IIB] Evening sandals, 1930
 {American Vogue, 12 April 1930, p. 104, © Condé Nast/ Historical Archives
 of Bally Schuhfabriken AG; photo: Manuel Fabritz, © Bally}

satin with a buckle and the other in white crêpe de Chine trimmed with gold and silver leather. The “boudoir” group comprises a peach-coloured satin slipper with an embroidered name and a pair of “Greek” evening sandals with gold straps, which give the foot the appearance of being almost bare. Only for these more frivolous boudoir styles is it harder to find *Bally* equivalents; for example, it was not until much later, in 1947, that the company produced a similar satin slipper.

It is clear that the *Bally* shoes are perfectly comparable with those illustrated in the *Vogue* article. What’s more, the comparison highlights the potential of the *Bally* collection: shoes of which only poor-quality black-and-white images now remain can be compared with real objects. Moreover, the article puts the evening shoe in the context of the many different styles of ladies’ shoe available at the time and the appropriate occasions for wearing them.

American *Vogue* is a rich source for analyzing shoe fashions. My research into the history of shoes involves examining barely discernible details in printed black-and-white photos from the 1930s. Fortunately, every edition of *Vogue* is available online with a picture quality as good as that of the printed versions.

I will first give an idea of how evening shoes are presented in American *Vogue* and then analyze the appearances of *Bally* shoes in the magazine; finally, I will look at the commercial links between *Bally* and the American market.

Shoe Fashion

Vogue was founded in 1892 in the USA. In 1907, it was bought by the publisher Condé Nast, which turned it into the first modern women’s magazine. Condé Nast increased the circulation tenfold, attracted more advertising, and succeeded in making the magazine a financial success. The first British edition appeared in 1916, followed in 1920 by the French edition. Today there are 21 different editions. The editor-in-chief in the 1930s was Edna Woolman Chase. She was in charge of the magazine for 37 years, from 1914 to 1951.

In the 1930s, *Vogue* appeared every two weeks, with over 100 pages in each edition. Even in those days, a large proportion of

the pages were advertisements, and alongside cars and cosmetics these also included adverts for shoes.

One edition in 1930, for example, contained ten full-page shoe adverts, mostly placed by shoe shops and large department stores. In approximately every third magazine there were editorials with shoes as their subject.

Looking through the magazines from the 1930s is like time travel; a whole world opens up. First-rate creative minds worked for *Vogue*: Cecil Beaton wrote, drew, and photographed; there are short stories by Dorothy Parker, and photographs by Man Ray and Horst P. Horst. The product is extraordinarily creative and diverse; in its mixture of illustrations and photographs, its detailed texts, its layout, every opportunity for innovative fashion reporting is exploited. Each cover, for example, integrates the *Vogue* logo into the title picture in a different way. At the same time, the magazine gives the reader a valuable insight into the style-conscious urban upper class of America of the 1930s.

For illustrating how shoe fashion was presented in the magazine, the pictures of one of the magazine's contributors, the renowned and multi-talented photographer, Edward Steichen, are particularly revealing. Born in 1879 and raised in Milwaukee, Steichen began to work for *Vogue* in 1923 and left the magazine in 1937. The first-ever use of colour photography on the front cover of *Vogue* in 1932 was of his work. His photographs of shoes not only convey an impression of shoe fashion of the 1930s, they show his mastery of innovative staging. They clearly demonstrate that the way in which fashion is illustrated in magazines is itself part of fashion. The poet Carl Sandburg, Steichen's brother-in-law, said that, for him, "many of the photographs of shoes he took for *Vogue* have just as great an aesthetic value as the photographs of roses or foxgloves on which he lavished all his skill and creativity".⁶ Every photograph by Steichen appears with his name, showing just how seriously he took his work on social and fashion photography.

A one-page article devoted exclusively to evening shoes appeared in January 1930 [FIG. III]. Steichen approached the shoes like precious objects, so that the shots were not cluttered, with the shoes commanding the space around

them. The most striking aspect of his photograph is the exaggerated interplay of light and shadow, making the shoes appear like objects projected by the light and producing a variety of reflections from their different materials in the photographic print.

A detailed eight-page article discusses beauty treatment for various parts of the body; the tips for face, hands, and feet are illustrated with full-page photos by Steichen and small drawings [FIG. IV]. The photo for the feet is astonishing for its feeling of timeless modernity; like other photos in the series, it has a captivating sculptural simplicity: naked legs stretch upwards, clothed only in a pair of flat Roman sandals. No other items of clothing appear in any of this series of photos; it is only the feet which are not left bare.

The advice given by the article consists of tips for keeping one's body conditioned through sport and maintaining a smooth complexion—the sort of advice still typical today. The last section (“Make them up”) begins: “The more feet and legs show, the more beautiful they must be made.” There



[III] Photo: Edward Steichen

follows a detailed explanation of what a pedicure is and why it flatters the feet. The article is evidence of the fact that sandals were becoming more and more fashionable, both for the beach and for evening wear, with bare legs, manicured feet and varnished toenails becoming correspondingly more topical. Nevertheless, the occasions on which women might show their toes were still strictly regulated. In 1939 an article appeared under the defiant title, “Vogue Protests! Open Toes and Open Heels Are Not for City Streets.”⁷

In another article with photos by Steichen, the shoes are worn by models. In all the pictures, hands and feet appear in elegant pictorial compositions. The different textures of clothes, furniture, carpet fabrics, jewellery, and even a dog’s fur contrast with and contextualize the shoes. The article, “Fashionable Extremities of Ten Smart Women”, goes so far as to name the women who have chosen and are wearing the shoes. “Each photograph is [...] the individual ‘shoe-cast’ of a fashionable woman who knows what she likes and likes what is smart [...]”⁸ The photo shows the feet of Princess Paley.



[iv] Photo: Edward Steichen
(American Vogue, 1 June 1934, p. 46, © Condé Nast)

Edward Steichen's photographs demonstrate the change in the way fashion trends were transmitted. He experimented with light, cropped images, models, and new technologies. The sophistication of his black-and-white photography fills even a modern viewer with admiration.

In the first half of the 1930s, sandals were fashionable both for the beach and for evening wear, but in the second half of the decade, platform soles and wedge heels completely altered shoe styles. This had an interesting, diversifying effect on evening-shoe styles as well; new heel shapes were introduced, and the foot became increasingly exposed.

Bally in Vogue

In 1929, before the first appearance of *Bally* shoes in *Vogue* magazine, the new *Bally* shoe shop in Paris was featured; an illustration shows the elegant Art Deco façade, designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens.⁹

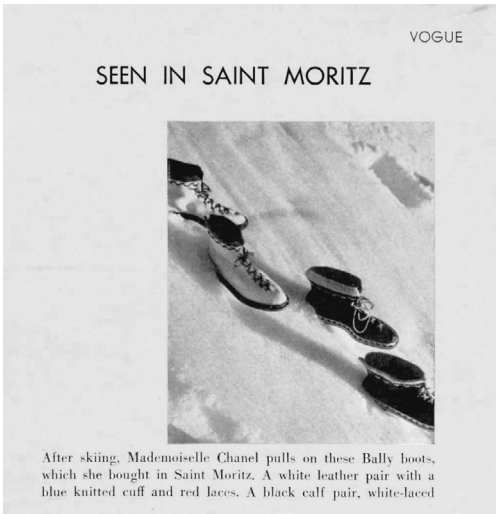
Between 1936 and 1941, there are altogether eleven illustrations of *Bally* shoes, mostly drawings in editorial articles on shoe fashion. After this, no *Bally* shoes are mentioned until 1947, when they appear again in the context of ski shoes, in anticipation of the Winter Olympics to be held that year in St. Moritz. Then there is another gap, until the firm itself placed advertisements in *Vogue* for the first time in the 1950s. Of course, *Bally* shoes can only be identified in the magazines of the 1930s if they are named as such in the picture captions. In an exhibition on Horst P. Horst at the Victoria & Albert Museum, I found evidence that other *Bally* shoes were also illustrated. According to the exhibition cat-



[VA, VB] Ladies' shoes by Bally, 1940
(*American Vogue*, 1 January 1940, p. 80, © Condé Nast/ Historical Archives of Bally Schuhfabriken AG; photo: Manuel Fabritz, © Bally)

alogue, a mannequin modelling a tunic by Alix was wearing shoes by *Bally*, although this is not mentioned in the magazine.¹⁰ We can assume, therefore, that shoes were matched with clothes as suitable accessories without being named in the picture captions. In terms of style, material, and function, *Vogue* presented many different types of shoe in its articles; in the case of *Bally* shoes, these included not just evening shoes, but also sandals. In July 1936, summer fashions are presented under the heading “Midsummer”; a double spread shows a bird’s eye view of models reclining in a meadow.¹¹ Two of them are wearing identical linen sandals by *Bally*, simple summer shoes made of a light-coloured material with a low heel. These are possibly the *Hospodarsky* sandals, named after their inventor, *Bally*’s chief designer. A quarter of a million of this style were sold to North America between 1923 and 1941.¹² In 1940, we find sandals again, this time in white material trimmed with blue leather.

Bally shoes with modest heels are also illustrated for day-wear, many of them featuring unusual details or materials. “Shoemaking is a plastic art”, declares an article in the August 1938 edition.¹³ The flexibility and sculptural qualities of the new shoes are the main focus of the discussion. Amongst the



[VI] “Seen in Saint Moritz”
 (American Vogue, 15 January 1939, p. 94, © Condé Nast)

illustrations are two styles by *Bally*: a buckle shoe, “soft as a slipper”, made of blue suede, and an opera pump in wine-red suede with ruched detailing. In January 1940, shoes in red and white are featured [FIGS. VA, VB]. The white lace-up shoe from *Bally* has a so-called “tractor” heel covered in red shagreen. In the *Bally* archives there is a very similar shoe, albeit in brown and without the laces. Shagreen was experimented with in Europe when cow and calf-leather were in short supply as a result of the Second World War. A by-product of the food industry, it was used as a substitute for reptile leather.¹⁴ A buckle shoe from *Bally* “for every day and all day long” is featured in 1940.

And in autumn 1941, in an article on black shoes, a *Bally* lacing shoe made of fur and suede is illustrated.¹⁵ Here, too, there is a very similar shoe, in the same combination of materials, in the *Bally* archives. Naturally, there could not fail to be a mention of ski boots: a small article in the winter of 1939 recommends Switzerland as an exclusive country in which to holiday [FIG. VI]. When Coco Chanel wears *Bally* on a skiing holiday, even functional shoes look glamorous.

Last but not least, *Bally* evening shoes were also featured in *Vogue*; for instance, the above-mentioned evening pumps. In 1940, *Vogue* featured an illustration of a linen evening shoe of unusual design; it envelops the ankle and is almost a hybrid of a summer sandal and an evening shoe.¹⁶ The 1939 article entitled “American Mania” features an evening sandal [FIGS. VIIA, VIIB]. The material is described as “black ‘cellophane’ cloth fired with gold kid”. In the *Bally* archives there



[VIIA, VIIB] Sandals by Bally, 1939

(*American Vogue*, 1 February 1939, p. 111, © Condé Nast / Historical Archives of Bally Schuhfabriken AG; photo: Manuel Fabritz, © Bally)

is a very similar shoe; in this case, however, black suede is used. The shape of the heel is interesting, being reminiscent of a famous shoe designed for Judy Garland for a stage and film production in 1938, allegedly as a one-off: for the platform heels, Salvatore Ferragamo had covered individual cork layers with suede of different colours; the *Bally* shoe quotes this ridged-layer effect. This clearly shows how closely *Bally* followed international shoe fashion and imitated its trends, even if the new styles were reproduced in a very much more restrained form.

In the *Bally* archives there are three other models with similar heels, and in the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum in New York there is a shoe which is identical to one of them, apart from being a different colour—a dark rose [FIG. VIII]. *Bally* shoes were thus not only endorsed in the USA, but also worn, treasured, and preserved.

Commercial Relations

“In terms of numbers, the USA was at the peak of its shoe production and consumption at the start of the 1930s”,¹⁷ writes



[VIII] Evening sandal by Bally, 1939
(Historical Archives of Bally Schuhfabriken AG; photo: Manuel Fabritz,
© Bally)

Anne Sudrow in her impressive study on the shoe under National Socialism. *Bally* was one of those companies which, early on, took inspiration from the American industrialization of shoe production. In 1876, Eduard Bally, the son of the firm's founder, travelled to the first American international exhibition in Philadelphia and brought new machines back with him. The mechanization of shoe production in the USA was a reaction to the demand of a rapidly growing population. Other reasons for the USA's pioneering role in the industry were that shoe sizes were standardized there as early as 1886, and the country was rich in raw materials.

Bally had a sales agency in New York from 1923, and in 1930 it took over a children's shoe factory in Philadelphia. From 1919 to 1929, sales of *Bally* shoes in the USA rose from zero to 295,144 pairs.¹⁸ Trade relations then fell victim to the effects of the Great Depression, in the wake of which protective tariffs, including tariffs on shoes, were introduced in 1930. From 1935 onwards, sales began to increase slightly again, until the outbreak of the Second World War once more made conditions difficult.¹⁹ Nevertheless, 54,482 pairs were exported to the USA in 1940/41.²⁰ At this point, the USA was *Bally's* third largest market, after Germany and France.

Switzerland, conversely, was also respected by the USA, both as a competitor and as a market. In 1926, a report by the US Department of Commerce, entitled "Switzerland: Resources, Industries, and Trade", concluded that Switzerland deserved a great deal more attention than might be supposed from its size and population.²¹

In 1942, *Bally's* house journal, *Bally Mitteilungen*, explained to employees in Switzerland the company's success in the USA:

With all due respect to the US shoe industry, it may be said that our products still lead the way with respect to detail. From a purely technical point of view, marvelous things are being achieved over there, but the meticulous care we take with uppers, seaming, silks, leather piping, and ornamentation, as beautifully finished as haute couture products, is not something one encounters in American shoe ranges.²²

And in 1944, the quality of the workmanship was emphasized again: “What we have been manufacturing up to now for the USA have been very expensive ladies’ shoes, characterized by tasteful styles, exquisite raw materials and the superior workmanship of their soles and uppers.”²³

Surprisingly, people on the American side came to much the same conclusion, a fact that also speaks for the quality of the *Bally* house magazine. In 1932, a report by the United States Tariff Commission, entitled “Boots and Shoes”, compared US products with imports. The shoes were categorized according to manufacturing technique, and the report recognized Swiss shoes as representing competition for American products in the “turned”²⁴ category for light women’s shoes and children’s shoes. The report notes: “Some of the imported shoes may have more fancy stitching and appliqué, foxing or inserts, than the ordinary domestic article, but the two are unquestionably competitive.”²⁵ *Bally* is reckoned by the report to be by far the largest shoe producer in Switzerland, manufacturing practically all the shoes which were exported to the USA, and around 80 percent of shoe exports from Switzerland overall. Here is confirmation that it was the cutting-edge ladies’ shoe which would capture the American market. There would be many difficulties to overcome along the way, however. Also in *Bally Mitteilungen*, we find an article by a certain P. Hünérwadel, reporting on his first journey through the USA as a company rep in 1922.²⁶ He travelled with a collection of 200 shoes, which had to be unpacked and packed up again twenty times in order to find takers for them among the leading department stores and businesses. It was not only difficult to find sales outlets; the sizing had to meet American expectations, and, above all, deliveries had to be prompt. American buyers were used to reordering successful styles four weeks after the start of the season, but it took time for these to reach New York by steamship. Nevertheless, it was important to capture this market. Ivan Bally, a grandson of the company’s founder, stressed as early as 1932: “For Switzerland there always has been, and there continues to be, an absolute necessity to export.”²⁷ This requirement became even more pressing during the Second World War; as circumstances became increasingly difficult in Europe, the USA was seen as

being the market of the future. It was a challenge the *Bally* company set out to meet.

The *Bally* evening shoes which were sold in the 1930s in the USA not only met North-American commercial standards but also the standards of fashion. The sources in the company archives and the articles in *Vogue* complement one another as proof of this: The shoes in the archive provide abundant concrete examples, while the editorial articles contextualize them in word and picture, and, again and again, precise correspondences between them can be found. *Bally* shoes shone, quite literally, by virtue of their exquisite detailing and high standard of workmanship. Documents from the archives, moreover, give an idea of how *Bally* went about capturing the American market and the difficulties it encountered in doing so. Clearly, great importance was attached to high-fashion evening shoes as products for sale to America. By following the journey of a brilliant Swiss product across the Atlantic to New York, we can thus trace an important stage in the development of the 20th century fashion shoe.

- 1 The catalogues appeared half-yearly; all of them are present in the archives, except for the summer catalogue for 1933. In all the catalogues, apart from those for 1932, 1932/33, and 1943, evening shoes are listed separately. From 1942 until the end of the war, there were only two styles; previously there had been around ten, and in 1937/38 there were as many as 19 different styles.
- 2 [Author unknown] 1951. Retail companies belonging to the Bally holding company were founded in 1906 in Berlin, 1908 in London, 1917 in Paris, 1921 in Brussels, and 1923 in New York.
- 3 American Vogue, 12 April 1930, p. 103.
- 4 One of the oldest US shoe brands still in existence today, founded in 1919 by Herman Delman.
- 5 American Vogue, 12 April 1930, p. 122.
- 6 Niven 1997, p. 536.
- 7 American Vogue, 1 July 1939, pp. 58f.
- 8 Ibid., 1 March 1935, p. 73.
- 9 Ibid., 22 June 1929, p. 53.
- 10 Brown 2014, p. 84.
- 11 American Vogue, 15 July 1936, pp. 28f.

- 12 [Author unknown] 1941, p. 8.
- 13 American Vogue, 1 August 1938, pp. 86f. For both shoes, Lawrence Parker is named as the importer.
- 14 Sudrow 2010, p. 270.
- 15 American Vogue, 1 September 1940, p. 118.
- 16 Ibid., “New Camel Colors”, February 15, 1940, pp. 87f.
- 17 Sudrow 2010, p. 31.
- 18 Straub 1942, p. II.
- 19 Ibid., p. III.
- 20 [Author unknown] 1942.
- 21 Tanner 2015, p. 177.
- 22 Straub 1942, p. III.
- 23 Kamber 1944, p. VII.
- 24 Sole and upper are sewn with right sides together and then turned, so that the seams are on the inside of the shoe.
- 25 United States Tariff Commission 1932, p. 15.
- 26 Hünérwadel 1944, p. II.
- 27 Bally 1932, no page no.

